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**The 2010-11 Scottish Football Season and its effect on political attitudes
towards sectarianism in Scotland**

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Biography

Born in Birmingham, England in 1981, I studied for a BA (Hons) in English & Literary Studies at University College Worcester. I then completed an MA in Literature at the University of Gloucestershire before undertaking a PhD at Kingston University. I study across two departments, Politics and English, as my work examines sport and literature as expressions of contemporary culture. My thesis analyses the ways in which sectarianism is both reflected and affected by the cultures of Scotland and Northern Ireland, and it is due to be submitted in 2013.

The current paper was presented at the 'Politics of the UK, the EU and the World' conference hosted by the Helen Bamber Centre and sponsored by the European Commission Representation in the UK on 3 November 2011, Dorich House, Kingston.

During the 2010-11 football season, an issue that has long affected Scottish society came to the fore. Scottish politicians had long ignored incidents of sectarian violence, largely due to the fear that an open discussion of the reasons for these incidents might leave them open to accusations of bias towards one particular side of the Scottish community or the other. However, the scale and regularity of arrests for sectarian incidents perpetrated by supporters of Scottish football teams has become impossible to ignore; the number of arrests between February and March 2011 alone is comparable to those at the height of the Northern Irish “troubles”.

It is clear that despite the protestations of some cultural theorists, sectarian violence affects people across the Scottish community, and even though it originates at football matches, football is not the sole cause, nor does the violence only affect football supporters. The events of the 2010-11 Scottish football season have forced politicians to react and this is a clear indication of the importance of sport in Scottish culture.

On the surface, there appears to be a level of consensus in Scottish politics. The largest two parties are Labour and the SNP; Labour still have the vast majority of Scottish seats at the Westminster parliament, with 41 out of a possible 59 (BBC 2010). The SNP’s overall majority at the Scottish parliament has firmly entrenched their power in Scotland, although they only won six seats in the 2010 United Kingdom General Election.

This consensus is not reflected in culture, however. Sectarian violence between Catholic-affiliated Celtic supporters and Protestant Rangers supporters has become an issue of national importance, as 2011 saw many incidents of civil discord. The ruling SNP have attempted to pass the “Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Bill”; the bill proposes that any behaviour which expresses hatred against an individual or group, based upon their membership of a religious group or a social or cultural group with ‘a perceived religious affiliation’, should become a criminal offence (Scottish Parliament 2011).

The SNP’s intention was to introduce the bill before the start of the 2011/12 football season but opposition from Scottish Labour, the Scottish Liberal Democrats, the

Scottish Green party, and the Church of Scotland have meant that it will come under a process of close scrutiny (STV, 2011, Church of Scotland, 2011).

The bill was proposed by the Scottish Justice Secretary, Kenny MacAskill, in response to a series of incidents that involved players, officials and supporters of Rangers, Celtic, and also the Edinburgh club, Heart of Midlothian. In the months of February and March 2011 alone, there were over 400 arrests for football-related disorder before, during and after matches between Celtic and Rangers. The majority of these arrests were made outside the stadium and many involved fans who had been drinking heavily; charges were brought for sectarian, racial and violent incidents and those arrested had to be driven to cells up to 50 miles from Glasgow because Strathclyde police had reached full capacity inside the city itself.

These incidents led to a renewed discussion of the policing problems caused by Old Firm derbies; the head of the Scottish Police federation, Les Gray, called for the games to be played in closed stadiums because ‘what happens on the pitch is reproduced throughout Scotland; on the streets, in pubs, in homes. You cannot justify it. It can't keep on going.’ (The Guardian, 3rd March 2011).

Gray made it clear that, in his opinion, the tensions on the field reflect those off it, and the two feed off each other to produce an escalating level of violence. Gray also argued that Scotland can no longer afford to police Old Firm games and that the violent incidents that occur are placing an unmanageable strain on Scottish society. Tensions throughout the West of Scotland grew as the 2010/2011 season went on, to the point that conditions in Glasgow and its surrounding districts were described as ‘incendiary’ by the head of the Scottish FA, Stewart Regan (The Scotsman, 3rd March 2011). In response to the escalating violence, the Scottish First Minister, Alex Salmond, was moved to call a “summit” between himself, the two clubs, and Strathclyde Police to discuss the problems that had arisen. MacAskill’s bill was the eventual result of the Scottish parliament’s acknowledgement that football-related crime in Scotland had become a social ill with ramifications for society as a whole. Many of the incidents that took place during the 2010/11 season involved Celtic’s manager, Neil Lennon.

Since he joined Celtic as a player in 2000, Lennon has been a topic of interest for Scotland's sportswriters and academics for the simple reason that he is a Northern Irish Catholic. Not long after joining Celtic, Lennon received death threats before a Northern Ireland international fixture which led to him retiring from international football. He has twice been assaulted in Glasgow, and has received 'live ammunition through the post [and] bomb threats' since taking over as Celtic's manager in 2010. On the 12th of May 2011, Lennon was sent bullets through the post; this was the second time this had happened to him. On the day previous to this incident, Lennon was attacked by a Heart of Midlothian supporter on the touchline during that club's game with Celtic (The Guardian, 12th May 2011).

This incident led to a charge of assault and breach of the peace aggravated by religious prejudice; Lothian and Borders police confirmed that the assault was motivated by sectarian bigotry on the part of the supporter (The Guardian, 12th May 2011).

However, the supporter was found not guilty of the charge of sectarian violence, and instead convicted of a breach of the peace, a lesser charge which carried an 8 month sentence. The decision was a shock to many in Scotland, as Hearts' chief of security had testified to the court that the supporter, John Wilson, had called Lennon a "Fenian bastard". Lennon himself said that 'the jury's decision was a shock and confusing. I wouldn't criticise the prosecution for pursuing the religious element of the charges. They were just doing their job. It was left to the jury to decide and the jury found it not proven. That is the way the justice system is and I just have to accept it' (The Guardian, 17th September 2011).

Lennon has to operate in accordance with '24-hour security measures that [Celtic] have put in place with Strathclyde Police' (The Herald, 9th March 2011). No other sportsman in the United Kingdom has to live under such conditions because of his religion and his nationality. Reid (2001, p.68) has described Lennon as 'the outsider' whose treatment proves that Scotland is far from being the egalitarian nation it is

often portrayed as. She suggests that sectarian sentiments are reproduced through the Scottish press because the media sets out to 'demonise' Catholics (Reid, 2001, p.68).

Lennon, first as a player and now as manager of Celtic, is one of the most important members of Scotland's Catholic community. He is one of the leaders of the best-known symbol of Catholic identity, and therefore an attack on him is often seen by the Catholic community as an attack not just on one man but on everything he represents.

Lennon himself has said that the death threats against him and his family started because 'of the choice of club, they [his detractors] saw me as something they detested' (Reid, 2001, p.66). Until he joined Celtic he had been a player with a relatively low profile; he was perhaps best known for having been kicked in the head by the England striker Alan Shearer whilst playing for Leicester City. As a player in Scotland he was subjected to sectarian abuse on a weekly basis and Reid has suggested that the Scottish press played a part in this.

Descriptions of Lennon tend to focus on his temper and his red hair, both of which are referred to as 'fiery'. Reid believes that these descriptions are intended to reflect stereotypes of Irish people; this is a possible reading of the descriptions but there is no undeniable proof of intent. It is however fair to say that continued references to Lennon's temper were designed to portray him as a dangerous player; until he moved to Celtic he had no significant problems with football's authorities and his disciplinary record was good. Coverage of Lennon was a self-fulfilling prophecy; in filling column inches about a player, the Scottish press were able to describe him as 'controversial'.

The controversy was contrived. Had Lennon's disciplinary problems, which were by no means out of the ordinary for a player in his position, been reported even-handedly, it seems certain that he would not have become the media figure he is today.

However, there have been some positives from the heightening of Lennon's media profile, in that he has been able to highlight what he perceives to be the depth and seriousness of sectarianism in Scotland. Lennon has said that sectarianism is:

a social issue [that is] not just for football authorities to deal with, it's maybe for politicians to deal with. It starts in the home and it's obviously passed down from generation to generation (Daily Record, April 15th 2011)

Furthermore, Lennon has stated that sectarian bigotry 'is too ingrained in Scottish culture to disappear' completely despite recent interventions from the football authorities and Strathclyde police. As a victim of sectarian violence Lennon is well placed to comment on the seriousness of the issue and his high profile has helped to bring matters to a head in Scotland. Politicians have begun to listen to those who have called for them to act; Lennon has been supported in his suggestions by his employers.

Peter Lawwell, Celtic's chief executive, has said that: [Celtic] are the only club to be the subject of such vile, sustained and relentless attacks [as those on Lennon]. It is intolerable that any football club, or individual, going about their lawful business in the name of sport should be subjected to this ongoing campaign of hatred and intimidation. This is Scotland's shame and it is high time Scotland addressed it (The Guardian, 12th May 2011)

However, Celtic and their employees were not alone in being the targets of sectarian intimidation. In April 2011, bullets were sent in the post to a number of senior Scottish Catholics, including Cardinal Keith O'Brien, the leader of the Catholic Church in Scotland. The incidents that involved Celtic were part of a wider campaign against prominent Catholics in Scotland; however, the first targets were Celtic employees. Along with Lennon, Celtic's two Northern Irish Catholic players, Patrick McCourt and Niall McGinn, were sent bullets in the post in January 2011 (The Guardian, 11th January 2011).

That the campaign began with Celtic is an indicator of the club's position within Scotland; they are now the most prominent representative of Irish Catholic culture in the nation, and those responsible for the threats targeted Celtic in order to gain maximum publicity.

Celtic's employees have become a target for sectarian violence and intimidation because the club that they represent have long been seen as a figurehead for Irish Catholics in Scotland. Many in the Catholic community have chosen Celtic as the main vehicle through which to express their identity. Celtic Park is festooned with Irish tricolours on matchday and it has been reported (notably by Bradley, 1998, Piskurek, 2010, and Bairner, 1994, amongst many others) that many supporters feel that the Republic of Ireland, rather than Scotland, is the nation to which they belong.

It is not the case that all acts of sectarian violence in Scotland are perpetrated by Unionists, but it is fair to say that the most severe incidents that took place within the 2010-11 season were all carried out by supporters of teams that identify with the Unionist cause.

It is reasonable to say that 'sporting contests can exaggerate the nature of ethnic conflict'. They cannot, however, exist outside of society itself. For up to 100,000 people every weekend in Scotland, plus those hundreds of thousands who do not attend matches but watch on television, sectarianism is a living reality because Celtic and Rangers fans are perpetuating it through singing and the display of symbols that relate to the old enmity between the two main faiths. Recent events have brought Scottish sectarianism into the media spotlight and extended coverage has highlighted the importance of the issue.

Sectarianism in modern Scotland is not a simple matter of groups being divided due to active religious worship. Piskurek (2010, p.107) has stated that 'football has replaced religion as the dominion of metaphysical experience in Western societies'. There is a great deal of evidence to support his claim, particularly in Scotland where attending Celtic and Rangers matches is demonstrably more important than attending a church service.

On police advice, Celtic and Rangers matches are often played on Sundays at 12.00. In theory there should be a dilemma for supporters of both clubs, but in practice there is not a decision to be made. The stadium is always full, and so are the public houses of the West of Scotland and beyond. The football match has replaced attendance at church as the focal point of the week for both communities. Piskurek (2010, p.109) argues that, as religious observance in Scotland has declined, 'the once culturally dominant issue of belonging to different denominations has become residual, and its symbolic function has been taken over by the emergent cultural form of football fandom'. Essentially, the people of the west of Scotland have maintained elements of cultural difference between them, and secularisation has simply changed the points of reference of this difference. In the absence of sectarian politics of the kind to be found in Northern Ireland, Scottish football provides a suitably competitive forum for arguments about religious and cultural difference to be played out.

It appears possible to argue that differences between communities, rather than being enforced by religious leaders or extremist politicians in Scotland, are in part maintained by the social importance of sporting rivalry. Historical differences are important but they are being rewritten and reinforced every weekend. Religious observance is no longer the sole marker for membership in a certain community; support for a political party is no longer a sure marker either. The rivalry between Rangers and Celtic was once simply based on supporters, officials, and players belonging to different denominations of the Christian church. In recent times, the cultural affiliations associated with these denominations have come to the fore and have been reinforced by violent incidents and multiple arrests for sectarian disorder.

While it is clearly negative that football provides the backdrop for sectarian violence, it is unfair to blame football clubs alone for a problem that Scottish politicians have long ignored. MacAskill's bill is still being debated but the one positive from the 2010/11 season is that the problem that it is looking to tackle has been moved into the mainstream of Scottish political life rather than remaining its dirty secret. Alex Salmond has said that 'there is a huge, genuine urgency in this matter' because the

aim of the Scottish National Party is to achieve a consensus across Scotland's different communities (BBC News, 23rd June 2011).

Sectarianism challenges the idea that Scotland has a single, unified identity, and Salmond's aim is to eradicate the challenge if that is at all possible so that he has a better chance of winning a referendum on Scottish independence. Sectarian attitudes abound in football because they have become less acceptable elsewhere; the bill aims to remove a bastion of bigotry and criminalise sectarian intent as well as sectarian violence.

This has led to complex legal discussion, and the bill has been challenged because of the difficulty in establishing serious intent. It has also been said that the bill would be unenforceable because of the sheer number of supporters involved in sectarian chanting. Nevertheless, the attempt to tackle sectarianism is serious and long overdue, and if the bill is even partially successful, then the 2010/11 season will be one to remember for the right reasons as well as for the level of violence that took place.

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